

National Union Building..
918 F. Street, N.W.
Washington
District of Columbia

HABS No. DC-463

HABS
DC,
WASH,
495-

WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

Historic American Buildings Survey
National Park Service
Department of the Interior
Washington, D.C. 20240

HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY

NATIONAL UNION BUILDING

HABS No. DC-463

HABS
DC,
WASH,
495-

Location: 918 F Street, N.W., Washington, D.C. Square 377,
Lot 827

Present Owner: Union Building Joint Venture
2013 D Street, N.W., Washington, D.C.

Present Use: Offices.

Significance: The National Union building is a red brick and
stone office building in continuous use since its
construction in 1890. Its architecture reflects
aspects of the Richardsonian Romanesque and Queen
Anne styles. It was designed by Glenn Brown, a
prominent Washington, D.C. architect. The
building is structurally sound and the exterior is
in generally good condition.

PART I. HISTORICAL INFORMATION

A. Physical History:

1. Date of erection: 1890. (Boyd's Directory of the District of
Columbia, 1891)
2. Architect: Glenn Brown.

Glenn Brown, the architect of the National Union Building, was
a writer and crusader for numerous causes as well as a prominent
Washington, D.C. architect.

Born in Virginia and educated at Washington and Lee College,
Brown worked briefly for N. G. Starkweather, a Washington, D.C.
architect, before entering Massachusetts Institute of Technology
to study architecture. Upon completion of his studies, he went
to work for O. W. Norcross, H. H. Richardson's master builder.
Norcross soon appointed him clerk of works, an office he held
for two years.

During his early years Brown had a great admiration for H. H.
Richardson. As a student at MIT "chafing under the strict
construction of classical orders and details," he was eager to
follow a leader whose ideas of art were "not limited and bound
by rules and regulation." Brown also took pride in the fact
that Richardson was a Southerner who has succeeded in the
North. (Memories 1931: 25).

When Brown set up his own practice in Washington it was his
ambition to follow in Richardson's footsteps. In later years,
caught up in the wave of World's Fair Classicism that was
sweeping the nation, Brown recanted. Writing many years later
he felt called upon to explain the disappointing results

obtained by the young architects who had set out to emulate Richardson. "While all of Richardson's work was artistic, interesting and cultured," Brown wrote, "he set a fashion in architecture that produced monstrosities throughout the country. Not a single one of his followers produced an example worthy of notice." (Memories 1931:27).

No complete listing of the buildings designed by Brown has been made. Some of his better known works include: The restoration of old Pohick Church (HABS No. VA-190) and Gunston Hall (HABS No. VA-141) in Fairfax County, Virginia; the National Union Insurance Building, 918 F Street, N.W. (1890, HABS No. DC-463); Dumbarton Bridge, which carries Q Street across Rock Creek (with his son, Bedford Brown, 1914); 927 Massachusetts Avenue, N.W. (1881); 1732 Massachusetts Avenue, N.W. (1889 and 1909) for Dr. James C. McGuire; 1832 and 1834 16th Street for Joseph M. McGuire; and two houses for Joseph Beale: 2012 Massachusetts Avenue, N.W. (1898) and 2301 Massachusetts Avenue, N.W. (1909).

During his lifetime Brown was best known as a crusader for numerous causes relating to the architectural profession and the city of Washington. Serving as Secretary of the American Institute of Architects from 1899 to 1913, he used this position to aggressively espouse the efforts of private architects to gain commissions for the design of federal buildings and for the establishment of an art commission to advise on the design of public buildings, sculpture and paintings. Brown became interested in the L'Enfant Plan for the city of Washington when writing his two volume work on the history of the United States Capitol. At his instigation the AIA convention meeting in Washington in 1900 was devoted to the growth and development of the nation's capital. The papers delivered at this meeting stirred the interest of Senator James McMillan and led to the creation of the Senate Park Commission and the Commission's 1901 Plan for Washington.

Brown also authored and edited numerous books and articles. His books include: History of the United States Capitol (1900); Papers Relating to the Improvement of the City of Washington (1901); The Octagon (1915); Personal Recollections of Charles F. McKim (1916); Roosevelt and the Fine Arts (1919); Memories, 1860-1930 (1931).

3. Original and subsequent owners: The building was constructed in 1890 by the National Union Fire Insurance Company which at that time had its offices at 643 Louisiana Avenue, N.W. The firm moved into the building by 1891 (Boyd's Directory of the District of Columbia, 1891). They maintained ownership of the building until 1946 when it was sold to Arlene M. Andrick who immediately deeded it to 918 F Street Inc. In 1949 this corporation sold it to George Wasserman who held it until 1956 when it was purchased by George's Radio and Television, Inc. In 1966 the property was sold to Allan H. Saturn and in 1975 Saturn

deeded the building along with the Atlantic Building at 930 F Street to Hood and Parsons Enterprise, Paul E. Parson, President. This firm sold the building to the present owners in November, 1978.

PART II. ARCHITECTURAL INFORMATION

- A. Description of Exterior: The National Union Building is a long narrow rectangular structure, six stories high with a full basement. The building, which fronts on F Street has four bays and measures 26 feet 9 3/4 inches across and 159 feet 4 inches in depth. It completely fills the lot.

The building is of brick bearing wall and steel beam construction. The foundation is also brick. The facade and part of the west side are covered with Seneca sandstone, partly rock face and partly cut, and dark red in color. Other shades of stone seem to have been used in several of the ornamental features, but the stone is covered with dirt and it is difficult to ascertain contrasting shades. There is a pavilion roof on the front of the building and a single pitch roof over the remaining part. The roof covering is slate. Six interior end chimneys, two on the east side and four on the west, are constructed of brick.

Stylistically the building combines characteristics associated with both the Queen Anne and Richardsonian Romanesque styles popular at the time of its construction. Its inherent verticality, numerous projecting bays and textured wall surfaces strongly suggest the Queen Anne style. Its Richardsonian Romanesque character is reinforced by the rock faced facade punctured by ribbon like bands of windows and the use of foliated forms on capitals.

The various treatments afforded the rows of windows divide the facade into three horizontal segments. The first segment is dominated by large arches which stretch across the entire facade on the second story level, framing two semi-circular windows. The arches are supported by three pilasters which originally flanked the entrance of the building. The original entrance remains; but an addition has been added to the western side of the facade to provide display windows for a shoe store, and a second entrance has been cut through to provide direct access from the sidewalk to the store. Above the entrance is a row of circular medallions featuring a six petalled motif with a center inlay of contrasting stone.

The second segment of the building encompasses the third and fourth floors and is marked by a curved four bay projection flanked by engaged columns capped by elaborate foliated capitals. Above the fourth floor the segmentation of the building is reinforced by a belt course of cut stone which carries the name of the building.

The third segment consists of the rows of windows on the fifth and sixth floors. The lower row is unornamented and deeply set while the upper is richly elaborated and framed by round arches and flanked by engaged columns. This particular treatment is strongly suggestive of a similar one in the Allegheny County Courthouse in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania designed by H. H. Richardson. Above the windows a row of narrow arched openings and a decorative stone cornice complete the facade.

The west side of the building borders on an alley. The rock faced sandstone of the facade turns the corner but gives way to red brick in the first of six projecting bays which extend out from the building over the side alley from the second through the sixth floors, where they are terminated by hipped slate roofs. The brick is stretcher bond with gauged brick lintel courses above the windows. The window sills are a single slab of rock faced stone. A belt course with recessed brick panels runs along the west side and rear of the building below the cornice incorporating the lintel course above the sixth story windows.

The rear of the building is plain. The brick wall is pierced by six rows of three windows. A double door at the basement level has a wide brick relieving arch.

The east side of the building is an unbroken brick wall. This side of the building had at one time been covered by the wall of an adjacent building and is scarred where the wall has been torn away. At the sixth story level a painted sign reading "The National Union Fire Insurance Company" is faintly visible.

B. Description of Interior:

The vestibule of the building opens onto a long corridor which runs along the east side of the building. All of the offices are on the opposite or west side of the building. An open cage electric elevator and a wide metal stair case form a central core half way along the corridor dividing it into front and back sections. This same floor plan is followed on each floor. (See data page 7 for plans.) The walls and ceilings are painted plaster. The floors of the corridor are tile.

The building is heated by steam radiation. It is presently lighted by incandescent light.

C. Site:

Located in the old central core of the downtown area, the National Union Building is included in the Pennsylvania Avenue Historic Site. (See attached map, data page 8.) There are numerous historic landmarks in the surrounding region as well as both public and

commercial buildings. The general area will be a focal point for future development stimulated by the adjacent Pennsylvania Avenue Development Corporation area and the nearby Metro which has increased accessibility to the downtown district.

The National Union Building is located in the Ford's Theatre block bounded by F Street on the north, E Street on the south, and 9th and 10th Streets on the east and west. Ford's Theatre (HABS No. DC-82), which is a national historic site operated by the National Park Service, is located to the west of the National Union Building on 10th Street. The Riggs Bank located at the corner of 9th and F Streets is a District of Columbia Category II Landmark and is also listed on the National Register of Historic Places. Located to the east of the block is National Portrait Gallery (HABS No. DC-130), the Old Masonic Temple Building (HABS No. DC-437) and the LeDroit Block (HABS No. DC-212), all of which are National Register properties. To the south of the block is the FBI Building. East of 9th Street, F Street has been converted to a mall as part of the Streets for People Program.

The National Union Building and the Atlantic Building (HABS No. DC-394), located three buildings away, are both District of Columbia Category III Landmarks. The Atlantic Building dates from 1887 and is constructed of red stone and brick. Twenty other buildings within the square also date from the nineteenth century, although few possess the architectural distinction of the National Union Building and many have been extensively remodeled or are in an extremely deteriorated condition. The National Union Building and the Atlantic Building are among the tallest of the buildings in the square and provide a strong visual force for the immediate area.

PART III. SOURCES OF INFORMATION

A. Bibliography:

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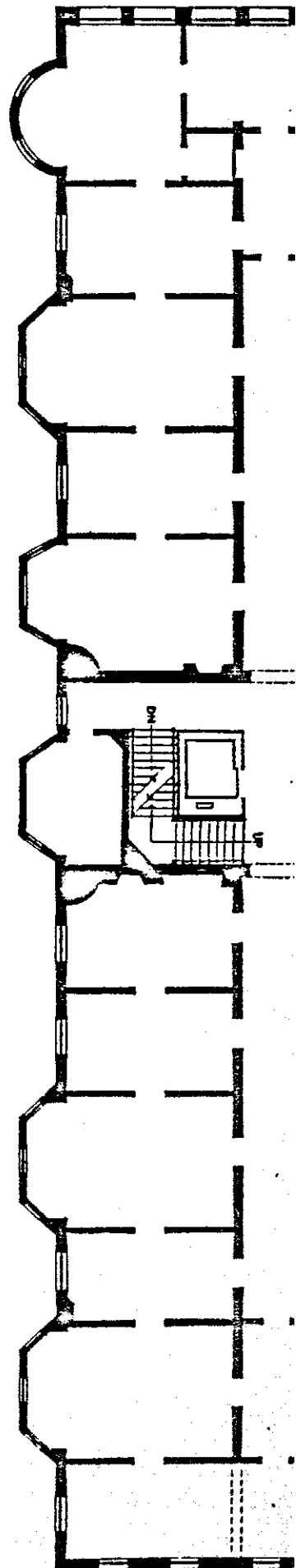
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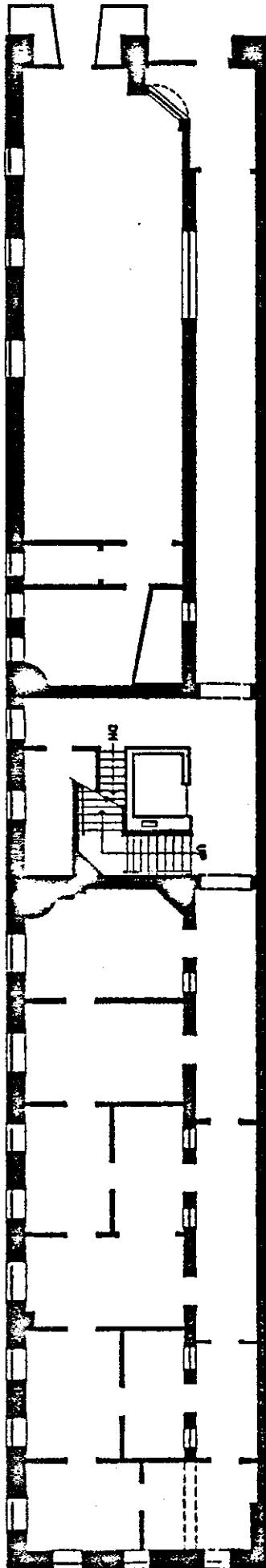
PART IV. PROJECT INFORMATION

This material was collated and edited for transmittal to the Library of Congress by Eleni Silverman, Architectural Historian, HABS, in June 1984 from documentation supplied by the National Trust for Historic Preservation in December 1978. The National Union Building is a National Trust Easement Property.

TYPICAL FLOOR



GROUND FLOOR



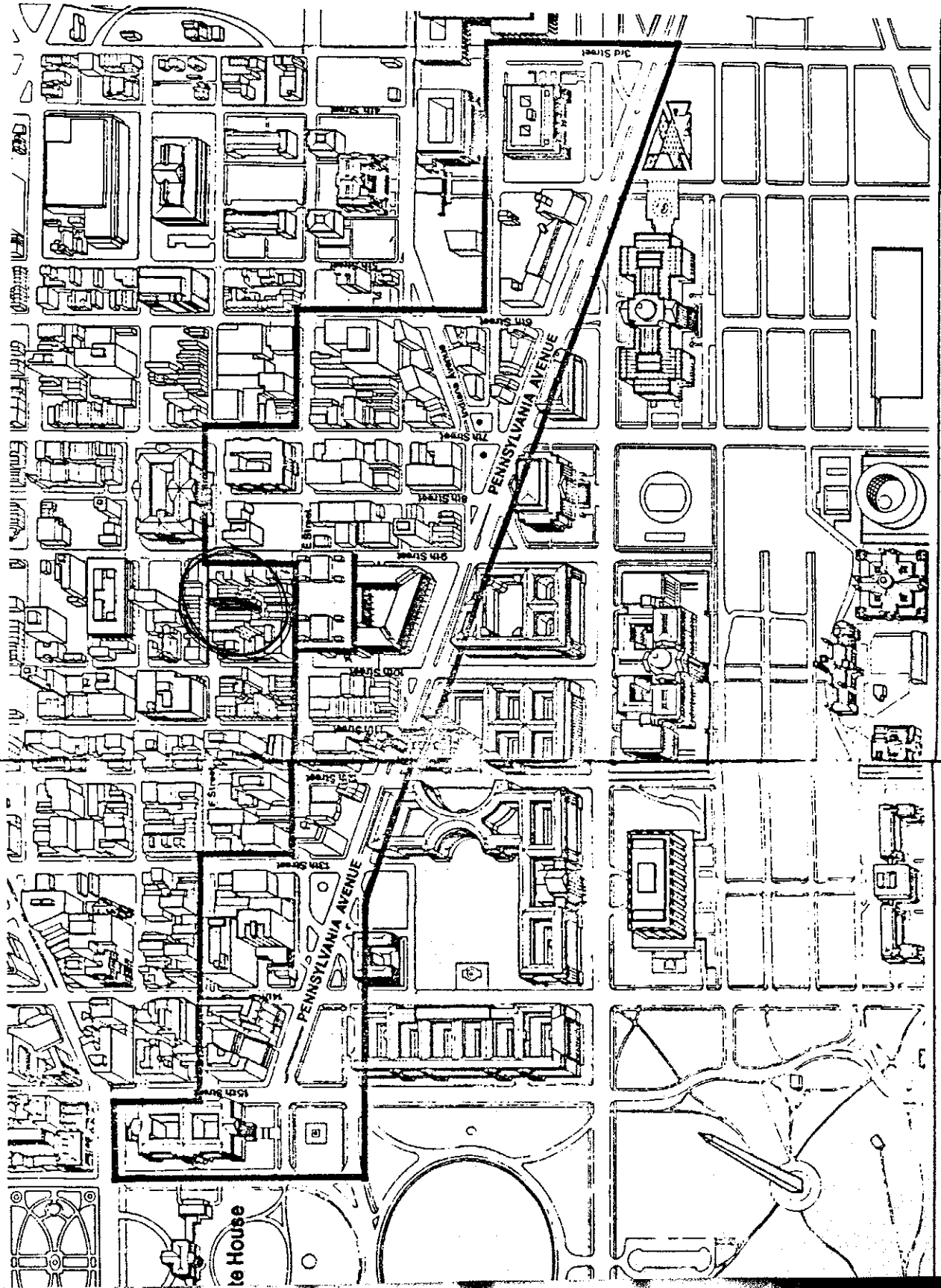
NATIONAL UNION BUILDING
918 F STREET N.W.
WASHINGTON, D.C.



0 5 10 15 20
FEET

OWNER:
UNION BUILDING JOINT VENTURE

DATE:
11/1/77



Historic Site
Pennsylvania Avenue Developer

Pennsylvania Avenue National Historic Site